Incident Command, Control, and Communication during Catastrophic Events

Statement of Chief William D. Killen
President

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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I am Bill Killen, Chief of Fire and Emergency Services for the Holston Army Ammunition Plant in Kingsport, Tennessee. I appear today in my role as president of the International Association of Fire Chiefs.

The IAFC represents the leaders and managers of America's fire and emergency service. America's fire and emergency service reaches every community across the nation, protecting urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods. Nearly 1.1 million men and women serve in more than 30,000 career, volunteer, and combination fire departments across the United States. The fire service is the only entity that is locally situated, staffed, and equipped to respond to all types of emergencies. Members of the fire service respond to natural disasters such as earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes as well as to man-made catastrophes, both accidental and deliberate, such as hazardous materials incidents and acts of terrorism. As such, America's fire service is an all-risk, all-hazards response entity.

The IAFC Endorses the National Incident Management System

Mr. Chairman, one cannot address incident command, control, and communication without discussing the National Incident Management System, commonly known as the NIMS. Homeland Security Presidential Directive (HSPD) 5, *Management of Domestic Incidents*, directed the Secretary of Homeland Security to develop the NIMS to provide a consistent nationwide approach for federal, state, local and tribal governments "to work effectively and efficiently together to prepare for, prevent, respond to, and recover from domestic incidents, regardless of cause, size, or complexity."[1] The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued the NIMS Document on March 1, 2004. As of September 30 of this year, federal, state, and local governments must be compliant with the NIMS, meaning that every government agency at every level should be familiar with its concepts and be able to use it during a catastrophic event. The response to Hurricane Katrina showed us that these requirements have not been met.

In preparing my remarks, I consulted with Chief Kelvin Cochran of the Shreveport (LA) Fire Department, who sent firefighting teams into New Orleans and coordinated the receipt of evacuees into Shreveport. I also consulted with Chief Richard Carrizzo, who heads the Southern Platte (MO) Fire Protection District and is a member of the IAFC's board, who I sent to the state emergency operations center (EOC) to help coordinate the fire service aspect of Hurricane Katrina response. My testimony today will include their first-hand experience with the use of the NIMS and the problems with command and control in the wake of the hurricane.

In addition, I consulted Chief Jim Schwartz of the Arlington County (VA) Fire Department, who was the operations chief for that department on September 11, 2001, and was the incident commander at the Pentagon that day. He used the incident command system with great success. I wanted to share his experiences and recommendations with this committee to show what can be accomplished when an incident command system is used to its full potential.

As noted at last year's subcommittee hearing on this issue, the IAFC endorses the NIMS as an efficient and effective way to bring resources together to respond to large-scale incidents. The reason the document is strong is that actual practitioners were intimately involved in drafting it. As long as responders and officials at all levels use the system, it will provide a solid chain of command and organizational system.

[1] Memorandum from Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge on the National Incident Management System, March 1, 2004, found in the NIMS Document, published on March 1, 2004, found at http://www.fema.gov/pdf/nims/nims_doc_full.pdf.

The fire service has been using the incident command system (ICS) for decades. In fact, the state of California was the first to create and adopt an ICS system. It grew out of the devastating 1970 fire season when California's fire services were severely criticized for failing to provide leadership in areas of cooperation, command and control, communications, and training.

Since then, America's fire service has fully embraced the ICS. Simply put, it is the way we do business. The ICS has allowed the fire service across the country to expand roles and resources as the complexity of an incident grows, incorporating local, state, and federal agencies.

Governments at All Levels Are Not Conversant in the NIMS

Mr. Chairman, we testified last year that Fiscal Year (FY) 2006 was too soon to begin to tie the receipt of federal grant funding to NIMS implementation. We understand that the NIMS Integration Center (NIC) will require either NIMS implementation or a description of how the states will use homeland security grant funds to become compliant by FY 2007. The IAFC believes that this is a reasonable timeline. However, the response to Hurricane Katrina made clear that this nation is nowhere near being ready to implement the NIMS, and that the NIC must take more aggressive steps to train government officials at all levels in this system – and to hold them accountable to it.

Chiefs Cochran and Carrizzo both noted the utter lack of structure and communication at any level of government for the first 10 days following Hurricane Katrina. Rather, territorialism reigned. Chief Cochran calls this "the disaster behind the disaster." He noted that the state had a system based on the NIMS, but did not utilize it. In fact, not even basic-level organizational management was being used. The fire service tried to fill the void by acting as they normally would: dispatching personnel and equipment where it was most needed.

For example, Chief Cochran responded to a request by the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals' emergency medical services section to help rescue people from New Orleans. He deployed teams of 27 department members, who took vehicles, rescue equipment, radios, and dogs with them, and worked on a three-day rotating cycle. Those teams rescued thousands of people from hospitals and the Superdome, despite the fact that there was no clear local organizational structure to whom they should report or request guidance. They just did what they were trained to do.

In addition, Chief Cochran managed the decontamination, triage, treatment, and transportation of evacuees arriving in Shreveport. Since no one in New Orleans or Baton Rouge was coordinating the mass exodus, he had to literally and figuratively wait to see who showed up on his doorstep. No one called him to see how many shelters were available and what their capacity was and, since no one had been given formal authority for the transportation of evacuees, he had no one to ask. Busloads of people simply arrived needing showers, food and water, and clothing. He was given notice of one group that was to arrive at 3:00 a.m., but they arrived hours later and in much greater numbers than Chief Cochran was told. His staff had to scramble to get the necessary equipment in place.

Chief Carrizzo reported that the EOC did not have a formal command structure until two weeks after the hurricane hit and, even then, no one made clear who the incident commander was. It seemed that military officers were in charge because they acted as the decision-makers. However, they worked in a separate sphere from the rest of the individuals in the EOC. Also, no one knew what branch of the military these officers represented, or whether they were from the National Guard or U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM).

The civilian leadership of the EOC was dysfunctional. For the first 10 days, anyone could enter the EOC by simply signing a sheet of paper by the front door. The staff in the EOC did not clearly define who they represented. They also did not establish a formal process for making and tracking requests. Instead, they would simply chase down the appropriate person and ask them for what was needed, or write it down on a piece of paper. State-approved vendors roamed around and, for the first week, took orders from whoever placed them. In short, everyone simply relied on their professional knowledge to determine what needed to be done and acted accordingly.

In addition, Louisiana's emergency response system suffered from problems common to other states. There was no statewide mutual aid system to move resources within the state to hurricane-affected areas. For the fire service, that meant that there was no clearinghouse for firefighting apparatus or personnel. In addition, the interim state fire marshal, who was charged with organizing the fire service for the remainder of the disaster, had no fire service experience. Unfortunately, it is common for state fire marshals not to have firefighting experience, because their job is to enforce building codes.

Had an incident command system been established, a state-level official – with a corresponding federal official – would have been in place in the state EOC for each of the necessary aspects of response, including first responder coordination (for example, firefighting, search and rescue, hazardous materials cleanup, emergency medical services, and human services), communications, and intelligence. Each these officials would have had sufficient knowledge and experience to meet the needs of his or her respective community, and would have acted as a coordinator – or clearinghouse – for that community.

Mr. Chairman, the purpose of this testimony is not to cast blame or question the compassion of the government officials who responded to Hurricane Katrina. The IAFC believes that this response serves as an important learning tool and example for why it is important for every federal, state and local disaster response official to fully understand the NIMS. In too many cases, a state or local jurisdiction may think that "it can't happen here." This sense of complacency and lack of urgency delays NIMS implementation. Every level of government from the local fire chief to the principal federal officer must be fully trained and prepared to use the NIMS at the very beginning of a disaster.

The NIMS Can Work

Mr. Chairman, <u>everyone</u> needs to understand and use the NIMS. We know from experience that incident command works. It worked in California on wildland fires, which is how it came into existence. For the past 20 years, the fire service has used it every single day on every single incident. What makes the ICS work is for every government agency at every level to fully understand it <u>before</u> an incident occurs. Those agencies must exercise together, plan together, understand what everyone brings to the table, and make hard decisions ahead of time about who will be in charge of what type of incident. We cannot save incident command for "the big one," but must implement it for every incident, every day.

The response to the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 provides a good example. Representatives of the Arlington County Fire Department, the Arlington County Police Department, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had been meeting for years prior to 9/11. Each understood the others' needs and capabilities and had established a high degree of trust. Because of those relationships and understandings, each agency was represented at the command post within 10 minutes, and knew coming in that the Arlington County Fire Department would be the incident commander. In fact, the agencies had previously agreed that they would not work as a committee in response to an incident. Rather, one of them would have to be a "first among equals." In the initial response to the Pentagon, the fire department was in charge, having worked out ahead of time how to treat victims and remove bodies without

disturbing the law enforcement community's need to conduct a criminal investigation. Once the fire department had concluded its work, the FBI became the lead agency.

This local command structure facilitated communications operability. In addition to the available interoperable communications systems, everyone benefited from having a unified command structure that facilitated communication between and within agencies. Firefighters on the scene could radio the command post, where each agency representative could then radio his or her personnel on the agency's specific radio system. This ability proved to be critical: When the operational commander noticed structural degradation and predicted the impending collapse of part of the Pentagon, he radioed the command center. A timely warning went out on all frequencies for personnel to evacuate, which saved countless lives.

How to Enforce Use of the NIMS

The response to Hurricane Katrina showed that response to a catastrophic event will be on a national scale. All 28 Urban Search and Rescue teams were on the ground in the stricken areas. Firefighters from New York and Illinois came by the hundreds to assist the New Orleans Fire Department. If we as a nation are going to build a system to respond efficiently and effectively, we must build a national capacity to respond. Part of that capacity will be the ability to use the NIMS.

To accomplish this goal, the DHS must require that everyone – from the executive level to the responder level – take the online introduction course. This course will be the absolute minimum necessary to establish a baseline capacity. Some agency heads, particularly those who already use incident command, may balk; however, they should take this course as a part of their professional duty.

The DHS should then issue a list of practical steps that each state must accomplish over the next year to become NIMS-compliant. This list should include a requirement to use the NIMS in exercises as a prerequisite to receiving State Homeland Security Grant Program (SHSGP) funds. The DHS should define who should be involved in those exercises at the federal, state and local level. No government official should be left out. This kind of practice will be critical to developing a working knowledge and understanding of the NIMS. Without exercises, learning the NIMS would be like learning to ride a bicycle by reading a book.

The DHS also should require both horizontal and vertical approaches to make the NIMS work. The horizontal approach would require regionalism. Though every response is local, no locality can respond alone when faced with a large incident. Agencies need to share manpower and equipment. As the Pentagon example illustrates, the existence of a mutual aid system in place provides measurably improved command and control communications across agencies and jurisdictions. This system must be given careful consideration by all involved parties, determining exactly what form help will take so that nothing is left to last-minute decisions or chance.

To foster regionalism, the DHS should require each state's homeland security plan to identify regions within its borders, to create regional boards, and to require those boards to submit a mutual aid plan to the state for inclusion in the SHSGP application. This will require regions to work together before an incident occurs, rather than trying to exchange business cards on scene.

The vertical approach would recognize that all incidents begin at the local level and work their way up. It also would recognize, as with the horizontal approach, that local agencies will most likely need help responding to a major event. For example, it would not have made sense for St. Bernard Parish to set up an incident management team in response to Hurricane Katrina, because the scope of the incident was

simply too large. However, it would make sense for each metropolitan area to set up a standing incident management team to backfill and support surrounding areas as necessary. The states should set up standing incident management teams to support all local governments as necessary. The federal government should set up a standing incident management team to assist the states as necessary. Though the U.S. Forest Service teams that the federal government uses have done an admirable job, the response needs to reach across all agencies.

Finally, we urge Congress to fully fund the NIC. The NIC is responsible for making sure that every agency responding to an incident understands and is compliant with the NIMS. While the House included $25 million for the NIC in H.R. 2360, the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2006, the Senate included no funding in its version of the bill. It is critically important that Congress fund this office in order to ensure that we are prepared to respond to future disasters.

Conclusion

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me here to speak to you today. It has been my pleasure to share the IAFC's views at this hearing. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

BIOGRAPHY OF
CHIEF WILLIAM D. "BILL" KILLEN

Bill Killen assumed the position of fire chief, Holston Army Ammunition Plant, Wackenhut Services, Inc., in Kingsport, Tennessee in January 2005. He served as director of the Navy Fire and Emergency Services from 1985 to September 3, 2004.

Chief Killen has more than 49 years experience as a volunteer and career fire fighter and chief officer in career, municipal, industrial, federal and military fire departments.

As an active member of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) for 30 years, Chief Killen has served on several committees and was the founder and charter chairman of the IAFC's Federal and Military Fire Service Section.

Chief Killen earned a bachelor's degree in fire administration from the University College, University of Maryland and holds the designation of Chief Fire Officer.